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ABSTRACT

The focus of this essay is the Afro American as an actor or agent possessing the capacity to play a part in shaping the contours of his life. The author examines ways in which humanistic and mechanistic psychological perspectives differ on fundamental assumptions about behavior and discusses how the humanistic trend in psychology can be advantageously used in examining the situation of Afro Americans. A review of the psychological literature on Afro American self concept and the family provides further examples of how the humanistic point of view might contribute to an understanding of Afro Americans. The author concludes that a humanistic psychological approach, by recognizing the human potential of blacks for growth, will foster the improvement of social scientists' attitudes toward blacks and will make intervention efforts more empathic, creative, and effective. (Author/MK)

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Transcultural Assessment: Conceptual Issues

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND BLACK AMERICANS

Wade A. Nobles

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Therefore, it is highly proper and appropriate that, this year, the tenth anniversary of the Institute, a group of black scholars has come together to produce a series of monographs which deal with the problems and conditions to which Dr. King devoted his life.

This series is published by the IAAA, which is dedicated to the identification and analysis of the contributions, problems and aspirations of Americans of African descent. However, the issues to which these scholars address themselves concern all mankind and have significance not only for blacks but also for Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, American Indians and all victims of prejudice and discrimination.

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HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND BLACK AMERICANS

by

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HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND BLACK AMERICANS

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Introduction

The focus of this essay is on the Afro-American as an actor or agent who shares with all of Mankind the capacity to play a part in shaping the contours of his life. Characterizing the individual black in America from such an "activist" approach -- as a person who "makes a difference" in the flow of events in his life -- raises questions about the usual portrayal of blacks in the social and behavioral science literature. Blacks are commonly described as re-actors rather than pro-actors to the circumstances they face. They are often said to respond, either as victims who accommodate passively to discrimination and economic marginality, or as aggressors who deal with their individual and group subordination by striking back violently. The options that blacks choose are described as submissive or defensive -- as reflecting powerlessness on the one hand or unthinking rage on the other. Such a picture is one of human beings who only react to their environments rather than take charge of their destinies.

In explaining this situation it is typical to assert that centuries of American racism had mainly debilitating psychological effects on blacks. For example, black psychologist Roderick Pugh

(1972), characterizes the pre-revolutionary psychology of blacks in largely negative terms. He describes the psychological attitudes before the struggle of the 1960's as reflecting "adaptive inferiority." This derived from the fact that blacks experienced considerable anxiety which had been conditioned by events connected to their black skin color. That is, the Afro-American's dark skin was the occasion for painful abuse and limited social opportunity inflicted by the majority white population on black people. The anxiety aroused by such abuse became a drive or tension whose reduction was associated with the learning of inferior modes of social response. Anxiety was also engendered by society's brutal response (and the threat of such response) to any aggressive display by blacks. Blacks learned to avoid the tension of such anxiety by assuming a stance of "adaptive inferiority," that is, inhibiting aggressiveness and presenting an humble demeanor. As black adults instilled this stance in their children for their own protection, presumably, many blacks began to believe themselves to be inferior -- the mask began to "stick to the face," as the proverb puts it.

Pugh notes other concomitants of such an adaptive strategy. With white behavior as a standard, becoming like a white person in speech, dress, and manners was held up as a goal. In this sense blacks were identifying with (trying to become like) their oppressors. Also, much self-rejection by blacks was apparent. In looking at the mannerisms and the eruptions of impulsive behavior by their frustrated brothers and sisters, some blacks were prone to comment on the unreadiness of blacks as a group for social equality with whites. Pugh acknowledged that Afro-Americans may have experienced a sense of worth in some roles, such as teacher, cook, athlete, musician, parent, for example -- but not as a black <u>person</u>. However, with the social upheavals of the Sixties in the United States, Pugh feels that blacks reclaimed a proud sense of self as persons (individual self-esteem) who are <u>black</u> (pride in group identity).

There can be no doubt that the experiences blacks have lived through have taken a heavy toll of their psychological adjustment. And Pugh makes a contribution to the consideration of the psychology of the black experience. However, in discussing the psychology of the black experience prior to 1963, Pugh draws heavily upon time-honored traditions of psychological explanation; traditions which, it seems to me, are heavily laden with the more "mechanistic" trends in psychology.[1] The emphasis seems to be on how blacks responded to the noxious social stimuli by assuming an inferior stance in order to reduce anxiety.

Although the traditional drive-reduction theme in psychology seems like a good one for understanding such notions as adaptive inferiority, I contend that there are perspectives in contemporary psychology that can help provide a corrective to the traditional view of the Afro-American. These perspectives are the same ones which hold promise through the research process for gaining a fuller grasp of the personalities of all human beings. These more promising approaches look at Man from a "humanistic" perspective. They posit a distinctly different image from the "mechanistic" conceptions of the human being.

Mechanistic explanations which have reigned in American psychology, have a long history in the philosophy of science in general (Rychlak, 1977). Briefly, in psychology, they imply a portrayal of the human individual as a passive being whose responses are primarily determined either by impinging environmental factors or by internal physiological and constitutional states.

Two theoretical trends have been influential in twentieth-century American psychology, behaviorism and psychoanalysis. The behaviorist position is the one most clearly identified with the mech-

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1 Pugh does use some of what we shall call "humanistic" terms to characterize the post-1963 psychology of blacks, but I believe even his pre-1963 depiction of Afro-Americans needs to be supplemented with more explicit humanistic considerations.

anistic tradition, because it views behavior as a function of innate or learned drives, or as a function of controlling environmental contingencies. However, there are some mechanistic trends in psychoanalytic theory also. Although psychoanalytic theory is quite different from behaviorist theory in important ways, Freud's voluminous writing shows clear evidence of both mechanistic and humanistic trends (Holt, 1972). In positing the reduction of instinctual drives as a primary aim of behavior, classical psychoanalytic theory tended to portray the human individual as the arena, so to speak, for the interplay of various kinds of stimuli and the associated responses.

Counterposed against this notion of Man portrayed in the passive voice, is another growing trend of thinking. For example, psychologist Isidore Chein articulates this view which focuses on Man "as an active responsible agent not simply a helpless, powerless reagent." In this active image, the human individual is seen as one who influences some of the things that are happening to him. In other words, the active being is one:

> ...who seeks to shape his environment rather than passively permit himself to be shaped by the latter, a being, in short, who insists on injecting himself into the causal process of the world around him (Chein, 1972:6).

A number of other psychologists have also developed outlooks with similar implications for the human image.

Abraham Maslow, for example, took an early and prominent part in expressing the growing dissatisfaction with the then-reigning emphasis on drive-reduction theories of motivation. Maslow (1962) stressed the need for a third force in psychology to counter the position of the other two forces which were influential in American psychological thought, namely, psychoanalysis and behaviorism. He acknowledged that there are important "basic" physiological and psychological "drives" within Man which direct his behavior. However, Maslow felt that when these are met, other sets of motivations emerge -- strivings for personal growth and self-realization.

Robert White (1959) levelled a similar critique at both experimental and psychoanalytic psychologies. He noted, "Something important is left out when we make drives the operating forces in animal and human behavior" (p. 297). In order to bring back what is "left out," White developed his view that organisms, particularly higher mammals, possess the capacity to interact effectively with their environments. This, to White, implies the presence in Man of a life-long motivation to strive for "competent" living as a universal characteristic of human development and functioning.

Another psychologist, Joseph Rychlak, reminds us that the opposing conceptual trends, which undergird the mechanistic and humanistic images of the human being, far antedate the twentieth century in the history of philosophy. Similar to Chein, Rychlak argues that it is time to be explicit about the implications of including a humanistic perspective into accounts of human behavior. "The tie binding all humanists," he notes, "is (the) assumption that the individual 'makes a difference' or contributes to the flow of events" (Rychlak, 1976: 128).

What I shall argue in this paper is that the traditional drive-reduction theme in psychology may be a good one for understanding such notions as adaptive inferiority. However, such concepts only present a part of the picture of Afro-American psychological adjustment, even the adjustment prior to the recent "revolution." Something is missing here, too, when we rely solely on drive-construct notions of behavior. I recognize that Pugh was less concerned with the underlying issues of theory construction and philosophy than he was with making a direct statement about the Afro-American situation. But, I think attention to the kind of theory we are using to discuss such issues will pay dividends in our understanding of the black experience.

Now, the task is to determine how the humanistic trend in psychology can be turned to advantage in examining the situation of Afro-Americans. This will be done, first, by looking at some ways in which the humanistic and mechanistic perspectives differ on funda-

mental assumptions about behavior. Doing so will allow us to present the humanistic position more clearly. For this task, we will use the thinking of Joseph Rychlak because he has probed these differences in a way that can be illuminating as we proceed. Next, we will consider the ideas of the humanistic psychologist Robert White, mentioned earlier.

An Approach To Humanistic Psychology

It is Rychlak's claim that any theory of human behavior must of necessity address itself to several key issues on which humanistic and mechanistic psychologists have basic disagreements. Put in the form of questions, these issues are:

- What are our assumptions about the causes of behavior?
- What are our definitions of meaning?
- What is our model for how the human mind and human behavior work?

Assumptions about the Causes of Behavior

With respect to how we go about providing a causal explanation for a phenomenon, Rychlak (1976) notes that humanistic theorists are inclined to use all four of the causal principles introduced by Aristotle many centuries ago in his theory of knowledge. For our purposes we can boil these four principles down to two, the notions of efficient and final cause. Efficient-cause explanation emphasizes the impetus or force by which a thing is constructed, moved, or made to happen. A final-cause explanation emphasizes the purpose or intent "for the sake of which" a thing was brought into being or an event was made to happen. This latter, "teleological," point of view introduces a subjective or introspective frame of reference to supplement the external, third person way of accounting for events.

A mechanistic persuasion would attempt to account for the behavior of blacks primarily in what amounts to efficient-cause terms. A recent essay by Hayes (1972) provides a good example. He uses a "radical behaviorist" psychological position to portray the forces acting on blacks. He argues that such forces have been brought to bear by whites' efforts to exert "behavioral control" over blacks. "Behavioral control refers to the systematic manipulation of certain environmental events in such a way that the observed effect occurs in a predictable manner" (Hayes, 1972: 58). Thus, he points out that:

> During slavery whites maintained virtually complete control over the behavior of blacks through aversive control [i.e., punishment]...With the abolition of slavery...mechanisms of economic control were instituted [in addition]...(Hayes, 1972:57).

These mechanisms served to maintain this control. Such a position sees the environmental forces constructed by whites as sufficient, essentially, to account for the behavior of blacks.

A humanist in psychology, however, would see the value of introducing intentions (final-cause principles) to understand the experience as well as the observable behavior of blacks. For example, Powdermaker (1943) notes that, although blacks showed humble and meek behavior in interracial situations historically, the intent of such behavior was often quite at variance with such a demeanor. Thus, at times blacks intended to mock whites by over-obsequiousness; in other instances in their meekness they intended to act out of a conception of personal (Christian) dignity ("turn the other cheek") and/or moral superiority.

As an example from a different source, consider a selection from the opening passages of Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) in which an old black man on his death-bed says to his son, "'I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction. . . .'" The writer continues, "They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of

men" (pp. 19-20, [emphasis added]). The humanistic psychological position recognizes that one cannot understand the behavior without understanding the intent that contributes to the behavior. Recognizing the intentional, purposive quality in behavior is to recognize the active role of mind we have been stressing here. Note, it is not that the effect of environmental events on blacks is unimportant, it is rather that such effects are not sufficient to understand psychological experience in the humanistic view.

Conceptions of Meaning

A second point that differentiates the humanistic and mechanistic approaches has to do with conceptions of meaning. The dictionary definition of the word "meaning" refers to that which one intends to convey, purport or signify. In signifying something, meanings point to or reach for "something else" -- which can be called a "polar" reference. Two kinds of meaning, demonstrative and dialectical, can be identified for our purposes here. Specific, deductively iron-clad meanings are called demonstrative or "unipolar" meanings. For example, one can link the noun "tree" with a specific class of referents when one uses a unipolar designation. Syllogisms are examples of demonstrative reasoning: granted that "all cats are animals," given a cat, it necessarily follows that it is an animal.

The more mechanistically oriented theorists are prone to take a given situation and analyze the efficient-cause forces which operate in it and necessarily lead to its specific (unipolar) character. Indeed this has been an important mode of advancing scientific thought. Similarly, it is important for blacks to understand the specific factors, both subtle and obvious, which operate on their lives. However an additional way of addressing the issue of meaning is also necessary for a full appreciation of the human situation in general and the Afro-American situation in particular. I am referring here to the idea of dialectical or "bipolar" meaning.

Rychlak uses the term dialectical (which has been used in a number of ways in the history of Western and Eastern philosophical

thought) to refer to that quality in which every specific meaning is seen to suggest either its opposite, or any number of other alternatives. From a dialectical view meaning is often framed by bipolar referents. Thus, one cannot have a concept of "justice" without some idea of "injustice." Similarly the term "up" for the dialectician necessarily implies a concept of "down"; these oppositional poles are indissolubly linked. One can consider a tree from a bipolar view also: assuming the existence of the tree implies other possibilities --for example, "nontree" or "no tree." Thus, one could say, "Is that really a tree out there or is it a figment of my imagination?"

This tendency of human thought to consider alternate possibilities, even in a clear stimulus situation, is a defining characteristic of this use of the term dialectical. It is also basic to human symbolizing capabilities (cf. Edelson, 1971, ch. 1) and is central to a humanistic view of the person.[1] For our purposes I think it captures particularly well one aspect of human potential that blacks have drawn on to survive. The mechanistic theorist is impressed by the unipolar characteristics of situations which push or pull behavior in this direction or that. A humanistic perspective supplements with a view that notes that even in the presence of unpleasant givens blacks have been able (dialectically) to conceptualize alternate views of themselves and other possibilities open to them. In many instances they have struggled to actualize these alternatives and they have had varying degrees of success historically.

For example, one can understand the ceaseless though often subtle efforts at resistance to slavery partly by recognizing the alternate (dialectical) conception of self that blacks had. Julius Lester (1968) describes this trend towards resistance anecdotally:

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1 Note that dialectical thinking does not guarantee more accurate thinking. Considering alternate possibilities about the existence of the tree does not make them more correct objectively. It does allow for creativity, and keeps an individual from being only stimulus-bound.

> Ol' Aunt Jemima was always spitting in massa's soup, while ol' John out in the field couldn't pick up a hoe without it just seeming to break in his hands. And, Lord have mercy, somebody was always running away (p. 36).

Thus, we see that physical combat is only one way to resist.

> In the context of America, it is an act of resistance for a poor black man to buy a Cadillac. To resist is to do whatever is necessary to maintain self-dignity (Lester, 1968: 36).

In this last passage in particular Lester points to the dialectical mode that must be taken into account in viewing blacks' behavior. That is to say, a particular black man's spending his meagre funds on a luxury is not necessarily just an arbitrary and irrational mimicking of (over-idealized) wealthy people. It may also represent an act that helps this man define and express a sense of dignity which is different from the external conditions forced on him. In the terms we have been using such an act can at times stem from the bipolar recognition of what is (poverty) and that which could be (material comfort), were his opportunities not unfairly blocked and manipulated by the system. Of course, a major goal of social change would be to enable the poor to gain sufficient resources so as not to have to strain so much in order to sustain a sense of dignity. However, we should recognize the continuing striving to "make a difference" that blacks have brought to their world.

Models of the Human Mind

A third point fundamental to Rychlak's argument is the distinction between two models of explanation of mind and behavior which can be seen in the philosophical positions of John Locke and Immanuel Kant. From Locke comes the familiar notion of mind as a blank slate. In this view mind begins to emerge by the awakening touch, as it were, of sense impressions from the environment. The development of mind and complex abilities is a function of the asso-

ciation and combination of simpler elements "put" there by experience. This is clearly consistent with a passive conception of the development and functioning of the mind.

In the Kantian view, on the other hand, the human individual from birth also brings certain "categories of understanding" to situations. These categories give form to (i.e., determine in a formal-cause sense) what can be known. For example, this perspective would hold that a child is innately able to make distinctions in his experience between the notions of "unity" and "plurality." These are not learned as separate concepts and then later associated in experience, although, of course, the words for these concepts are learned only when language develops. The child is born bringing such rudimentary (and dialectical) "meaning-framing premises" to experience. These operate like a pair of spectacles to give form to experience. As the individual matures and interacts with the world such premises, of course, become more sophisticated.

The implication for the Afro-American in this is that blacks like all human beings come to the world with mental equipment oriented toward conceptually organizing experience, not just accepting what is given. While behavior is partly shaped by environmental and constitutional factors (sometimes to a great degree), people also bring a readiness to impose their own point of view on a given situation as well. A continuation and development of this readiness through the elaboration of the intentional and dialectical potentials of the human mind throughout life is what has helped blacks to survive in America.

Furthering the Humanistic Theme

In some of its aspects, this purposive orientation in humanity has concrete implications for self-development. A consideration of some of the thinking of the psychologist Robert White in this regard can be of further benefit to our investigation of the black

experience. In his first major exposition of what amounts to a humanistic critique of extant psychological theory, White (1959) pointed out how both experimentally derived and psychoanalytic conceptions of the basic nature of humankind failed to account for what can be observed about behavior both in and outside of the laboratory.

To supplement the themes emphasized by these two most popular traditions in American psychology, White developed a perspective that has clear humanistic implications. The crux of his formulations is the concept of competence. Competence, as defined by White, is crucially related to a human infant's responses from the beginning of its life. It is when the child is comfortable in his crib with his biological needs taken care of that he is more amenable to turning his attention to the dangling objects left there to amuse him and is more able to evaluate them in their own right. Studies seem to show that within certain limits those objects which the child can do the most with and/or which are most responsive to his efforts (in terms of the movements, sounds and visual changes they produce) are those which get the most attention.

The more the baby's interactions have pleasing effects in the environment the more he is likely to repeat and expand his activities. As he does so, he becomes more skilled in achieving such effects, that is, he becomes effective in his interactions with his environment. White (1963) calls this kind of activity "effectance" behavior; the emotion that accompanies the opportunities for effectance behavior is a "feeling of efficacy."

> Effectance thus refers to the active tendency to put forth effort to influence the environment, while feeling of efficacy refers to the satisfaction that comes with producing effects (p. 185).

An important consequence of this behavior is that it leads to the formation of psychological structures, so to speak: "...it leads to an accumulating knowledge of what can and cannot be done with the environment" (White, 1963:186).

The neonate is confronted with a myriad of possibilities and uncertainties and has to gradually develop the categories for stabilizing his experience. In Rychlak's terms: "This quality of open alternatives in experience demands that the human being affirm [emphasis added] some...meaning at the outset for the sake of which behavior might then take place..." (1977:295). Rychlak uses affirmation to describe a person's choosing, presuming, or deciding that a thing is so or has a certain character (among the possibilities conceivable in the given situation). Affirmation "is...one of those active [emphasis added] roles assigned to mind by humanists, because which pole of a bipolarity is affirmed or which item of unipolar experience is singled out for identification is up to the individual and not to the environment" (1977:295).

This is a very important statement for the view of the Afro-American we are developing here. While the slave felt forced to go out in the field to work, to return to Lester's example, it was other than mere clumsiness that led to the breaking of farm tools. Even if one prefers to emphasize how efficient the slaves on the plantation were, as Fogel and Engerman (1974) do, it was not primarily out of a sense of capitulation to the system. From the view being proposed here individuals began to nourish dormant potentials for effectance intentions (perhaps with the aid of lingering tribal traditions from the old country) which facilitated their coming together in group and family organizations that were stable and supportive.

To return to the developmental process, in introducing the concept of effectance behavior White (1963) describes one of the methods by which the infant, over a period of time, actively comes to terms with his environment. Effectance motivation is a way of describing one kind of premise that the newborn child brings to his experience, and in White's view it is a premise that the human individual continues to bring to his experience throughout life. When the baby reaches out to make contact with his rattle -- an (unconscious) act of "affirmation," his contact elicits a pleasing

effect, a further meaningful experience. With repetition he gradually becomes more effective in achieving this experience as he evolves towards competence. Effectance motivation has clear final-cause or intention-construct implications in that behavior is pursued for the sake of the feeling of efficacy. Eventually as the mature person develops a sense of "self," he or she begins to order life in terms of enhancing effectance and competence. While this is consistent with more unipolar definitions of reality, in addition, it is likely that effectance behaviors are ways by which variations unique to the individual (i.e., a child's individual style) get imposed on a situation within the realm of what is possible. Such unique variations would derive from his responding to alternate dialectical conceptions of a situation.

Through repeated and expanded contacts with the world the child develops wider ranges of effectiveness appropriate to his emerging developmental stages. That is, he acquires an actual competence and a "sense of competence" about his dealings with his environment. A person's competence represents his existing ability to interact effectively with his environment.

> Competence is the cumulative result of the history of interactions with the environment. Sense of competence is ... the subjective side of this, signifying one's consciously or unconsciously felt competence --one's confidence--in dealing with the various aspects of the environment (White, 1963:186).

The term feeling of efficacy is reserved for what the individual experiences in each transaction. Sense of competence refers to "the accumulated and organized consequences in later stages of ego development" (White, 1963:39). Striving to enhance competence in one's dealings with the physical and social world is ideally a life-long process and is characteristic of human functioning in all cultural contexts.

Because the crux of the effectance concept is action on the environment and its consequences, White's developing human being is

no "passive reagent" but clearly one who, even from the crib, seeks to "generate circumstances" and inject himself "into the causal process of the world around him." In the broadest humanistic sense, action refers to all mental activity. It may or may not involve action in the sense of bodily movement but it does involve the individual as premising "causal agent." In fact, "mind" can be seen to refer to all the things that a person does in the way of purposive and directed efforts to come to terms with the world (Schafer, 1976). "Mind" represents one's continuing efforts to structure situations cognitively and perceptually and respond to situations "feelingly" -- joyously, cautiously, sadly -- in the process of living.

Thus, what I have been saying is that a humanistic focus as articulated by certain writers in contemporary psychology can be useful to our understanding of the Afro-American. This theme is one that emphasizes the individual as actively coming to terms with his or her environment. The individual strives to do this by making choices in dialectically conceived situations, that is, situations which the individual attempts to see as having multiple possibilities for action. Through such choices individuals attempt to carry out self-determined intentions and purposes and are not simply responding to environmentally determined factors. As we look at the history of blacks we find that they have responded in a variety of what appear to be arbitrary ways. Underlying this seeming arbitrariness, frequently, is a premise of self-worth and competence belied by external circumstances. When Pugh (1972) states of blacks in history that "the form of resistance -- when present -- was largely passive" (p. 10), he seems to dismiss such forms of black resistance. But even passive resistance is an act, an act borne of a conception of self that was different from that which whites had of blacks. Blacks took the kind of action they were able to take under the circumstances.

Again, the focus on a drive-reduction or environmental-contingency psychology tends to see Afro-Americans only as passive victims. It is very true that blacks have been and continue to be

victimized by this society. The more mechanistic psychological views may be able to speak to this fact rather well. However, this focus overlooks other important aspects of human psychology and, therefore, other psychological explanations necessary to understanding blacks' survival. Man's tendency not simply to react to stimuli, his tendency to be an "active agent," stems from almost irrepressible urges manifest at birth toward an effective relationship with the environment which through action grows eventually into actual competences in the world. Such a conception does not preclude recognizing the individual's relationship to the environment based on drives and their primary satisfaction -- including anxiety and its reduction. Rather the humanistic theme that places emphasis on the independent striving to affirm and to make contact with the world is a necessary supplement. A psychological conception of all human individuals as potentially active shapers of their worlds makes it easier to understand how blacks survive. It is this that is missing from much of the theorizing about the psychology of the black experience.

Whether in the form of violent revolt or passive resistance; whether engaged in the effort to make themselves the best artisans, farmers, or professionals possible, throughout history blacks have struggled to realize a sense of themselves that was meaningful to them. A conceptualization of the person that can encompass the fact of survival of Afro-Americans must include this quality of striving or "motivation." Chein (1972) notes:

> The essential human quality is . . . one of commitment to a developing and continuing set of unending, interacting, interdependent, and mutually modifying long-range enterprises (p. 289).

Slavery, poverty and racism have been and are dehumanizing to the extent that they lead one to give in to being continually preoccupied with the miseries of the present. That is, such conditions are dehumanizing to the extent that they lead "to the abandonment of one's claims on, and one's program with regard to the relatively distant future" (Chein, 1972:289). At times this has happened to

some black people under the bombardment of the efforts of American society to achieve just this. But many Afro-Americans have managed to use their creative human capacities in modest or striking and socially contributive ways to resist being dehumanized.

Black Self-Concept and the Family

Let us look briefly at an example from the psychological literature on Afro-Americans, specifically some of the literature on self-concept and the family, to exemplify further how this humanistic point of view might make a contribution to our understanding. From one perspective "self-concept" can refer to the interrelated set of conscious and unconscious attitudes and beliefs that represent what one calls "me" and "mine." Important to the self-concept is the level of "self-esteem," the degree of positive valuation of self. People need to maintain a viable level of self-esteem to adapt effectively (Epps, 1975).

The literature on blacks is contradictory regarding level of self-esteem. Some reliable studies point to a trend for black children, even as early as the pre-school period, to demonstrate somewhat negative attitudes toward pictorial or doll-figure representations of their own race (Porter, 1971; Williams & Morland, 1976). These data have been taken as an indication of problems in self-esteem. Other studies, however, indicate that self-esteem among black children of varying ages is quite high (Taylor, 1976). In resolving this seeming contradiction one must recognize that an individual's self-concept is a complex, multi-faceted entity. For many blacks there is good reason to believe that personal self-esteem, one's sense of worth as a person, is somewhat independent of racial self-concept, one's sense of self as member of a particular racial group in the United States. One recent review of the research on personal self-esteem indicates that sense of personal worth among blacks is and possibly always has been at least as high as among whites (Cross, 1978). Rather it is that aspect of self-esteem that is related to

racial group membership that has been comparatively low in the past. There is some evidence that this, too, may be changing in positive directions (McAdoo, 1977; Cross, 1978). (The interpretation regarding personal self-esteem is not consistent with Pugh's analysis, but this interpretation of the racial self-concept literature would be supportive of Pugh's notions regarding attitudes of adaptive inferiority.)

There is general agreement that the development of attitudes toward the self is crucially related to the child's experiences in the family. For black Americans a critical role played by the family has been to help engender a sense of personal worth in their growing children and separate that sense of worth from the negative role ascriptions that a dominant racist society has attempted to force on being an Afro-American (Pettigrew, 1964). Again this seems paradoxical if one looks at the conflicting literature on the black family. The traditional social science wisdom has been that black families during and after slavery were typically disorganized and unable to function as effective socializing agents. Cross (1978) in his recent review points out that the most recent scholarship on the black family should put such allegations to rest. Post-slavery black families were quite similar in structure and stability to families of other ethnic groups in many respects. Cross notes that even when one looks at the larger number of female-headed households that have obtained among blacks one sees that such families more often than is realized have been supported and stabilized by extended kinship networks or by non-kin regarded as kinfolk. This revised view of the black family would be consistent with the indications that personal self-esteem has always been strong in the black community. Thus, there have traditionally been strengths in the black family, more and more being recognized, which have nurtured personal self-esteem in the black child thereby helping to mitigate against the corrosive impact of racism on other aspects of self-concept.

By what mechanisms has the family done this? Our knowledge of personality development and the family's function in this

regard is far from complete, but the language of humanistic psychology can provide a useful perspective. We indicated earlier that blacks have come to their struggle armed with a universal human capacity to choose alternate modes from those which white society offered them of conceptualizing themselves and their potential. This capacity was guided by another human potential, the striving for effectance and competence.

From the humanistic view that we have been considering the "self" is a construct which describes the contribution made to behavior by an organism which brings "affirmations" or meaningful choices to bear in a given situation. This use of the term self is an introspective formulation which reflects the sense of consistency and orientation -- the identity -- in behavior. The poor man's choice to buy a Cadillac, in Lester's example mentioned earlier, may seem arbitrary and irrational viewed externally (i.e., viewed extrospectively rather than introspectively). However, seen subjectively it represents a choice meant to affirm a particular sense of self that is not defined simply by the blocked opportunities that accrue to his racial status. This focus on self as choosing among alternative options in life puts an emphasis on the individual as active agent.

This perspective goes on to note that not all people are aware of themselves as beings -- as selves -- making choices according to the intentions they set. The development of an awareness of oneself as a being who chooses the conceptualizations which bring meaning to the world is a highly desirable goal of human development.

> For the person to develop...self-awareness, he must see the contributions he makes to experience...[and recognize the meanings he affirms.]...In this sense the self must be intended -- that is, the purposive meaning of self must be brought to life by the individual... (Rychlak, 1977:355).

I submit that the black family has nurtured a sense of personal self-worth in the black child partly by "bringing to life" a sense of self as an agent able to propose and affirm hypotheses about poten-

tial at variance with those which white society offers.[1] The family does this, for example, through exposure to models in the home and community that express alternatives. The family nurtures a sense of self-awareness -- a sense of self as capable of setting its own intended goals -- and the family helps expose the child to the means of carrying them out. (That a sense of having an impact on the options affecting one is related to achievement is supported by the Coleman et al. (1966) finding that a sense of "fate control" was positively related to school achievement in black children.)

The readiness to nurture a sturdy sense of self has been present not only in the literate and well-to-do in the black community. Robert Coles (1964) cites the example of an unlettered Mississippi black woman who noted that when her pre-school age children asked her "why colored people aren't as good as white people," she made it a point to tell them that it was not that blacks are not as good, it's that they're not as rich. She went on, "Then I tell them they should separate being poor from being bad, and not get them mixed up...That's bad, not liking your own self" (p. 64). Black families of varying class levels have long recognized and carried out their duties in this regard.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon to hear astonishment expressed by white Americans that blacks have achieved as much as they have under the weight of American history. Survival of blacks and the continued will to achieve might not be so surprising if one had a different conception of this process. In addition to making defensive

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1 It was this kind of sense of self that Malcolm X (1965) came to when his eighth grade teacher told him that his ambition to become a lawyer was "no realistic goal for a nigger." "It was a surprising thing that I never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn't, I was smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be" (p. 37).

adjustments to the forces imposed upon them, blacks have also made use of any available resources to nurture and keep alive some portion of an independent sense of self. If blacks had been constrained by their environment into a unipolar definition of themselves and their situation (without continually imagined, and often actualized alternatives), then we would be hard pressed to understand the origins of the "psychology of self-reclamation" (Pugh, 1972) that, presumably, characterized the mood of the Sixties. The humanistic perspective supports the idea that there were positive elements in the personalities of blacks which could be set free by a changing social and political atmosphere. Thus, blacks are bringing certain longstanding aspects of self to a new plane of consciousness and expressing them with greater force.

The term "competence" with its connotations in humanistic psychology is used here as a way of inviting a rethinking of the situation of Afro-Americans. It is clear that 300 years of efforts to dehumanize blacks have led to comparative disadvantages in negotiating the American system. To say that "competence" is a relevant term here is not to deny that blacks have social problems as a group. Rather, using a humanistic focus is to emphasize a process, a striving, which blacks, like all humans, manifest with the aim of continually surmounting social obstacles in the pursuit of their development as individuals and as a group.

The conception that social science has of blacks will determine the way social scientists relate to blacks and how they intervene in the lives of blacks. The view expressed here is that recognizing the human potential in blacks for growth will change attitudes towards them in a positive direction and make intervention efforts ultimately more empathic, creative, and effective. Again the term competence should not be misunderstood to refer to an immediate readiness to compete in any given arena with high-level skills. Rather it refers to the potential for development as deriving from the process that all human beings use to address the environment from birth. This must in turn be met with the appropriate responses by a thoughtful society.

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